

SCRIPTURE:

Exodus 20:12:

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Acts 9:36-43:

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.' So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

SERMON: "Expansive" The Rev. Brent Damrow

I wonder how loud it would have sounded. I wonder how loud that knock on the door would have been, in the midst of a home that suddenly felt so empty, in the midst of the utter silence of grief. I wonder how surprised – no, maybe even shocked – the widow would have been to have found a warm, knowing, smiling face on the other side of the door, and feel hope. Feel that the world might begin to turn right side up again. I wonder when she first touched the fabric that Tabitha held out to her, how did the softness of that which Tabitha had made with her own hands to give to her, how did that softness begin to break down barriers, self-protecting barriers that were already forming. I wonder how being wrapped in that kind of love returned expansion to a world and life that must have seemed like it was shrinking by the moment. I wonder how long it was before that woman -- that first widow that Tabitha came to visit, that first widow out of many widows -- I wonder how long it was before she came and joined Tabitha to go to the next grief-stricken home. I wonder how long it was before she wanted to add her own knowing smile, and maybe even her own touch of softness, some touch of hope to moments that must have felt anything but hopeful.

For you see, in our story today, Tabitha, this woman who is a disciple named explicitly by Luke, this woman Tabitha started something that expanded well beyond I think anything she could have imagined. What we know is that Tabitha would absolutely have shared with those women something that would have stoked that hope, from elusive yearning to trying to imagine that it might be okay, to a trustworthy promise that they were in it together. Tabitha would have shared why she did what she did. She would have told stories of the one she followed, of Jesus. The one whom she watched and heard and witnessed bring life and healing and wholeness everywhere he went. The one that she knew ministered to the lonely. The one that she knew ate with the

outcasts. The one who showed Tabitha the way to live. She also would have shared stories of how Jesus fit into the larger picture of God, the one who creates and gives life, the one who made things good and who freed people from slavery. The one who gave the people a home. The one who makes a home with us. And the one who had just recently, if stories from Jerusalem were to be believed, the one who broke the barrier of death to bring Jesus back to life. The one who even now was ushering in a new creation, a new start, a whole new kind of kin-dom.

I want to say it again. Tabitha, you see, was a full-fledged, bona fide disciple. Oh yeah, she's named explicitly by Luke here in verse 36: "There was a disciple named Tabitha." But even more so, Tabitha was a disciple because of what she did. It was written all over the way she mothered. To be a disciple, you see, means literally to be a learner. And Tabitha so clearly learned from Jesus, didn't she? To listen to Luke tell the story, she was devoted to good works. She didn't dabble in them, she didn't do them on the side, she didn't do them when time was left over. She was devoted to good works. Tabitha was rooted in kindness and compassion, to helping those whose worlds were contracting. Sounds awfully Christ-like to me. Awfully mother hen-ish, gathering the vulnerable under the wings of the beautiful textiles that she made, gathering them – as you see in our scripture reading – into community. Into an expansive life. Into connection and into beauty.

Tabitha, you see, lived resurrection. Tabitha lived Easter. She lived the truth of new life even in the shadow of death. She lived in a way that built or rebuilt hope and trust for those who most needed it. She lived Easter, not as a spectacular moment, not as a day to put on your best hat and go out. She lived Easter not as some isolated miracle, but as the truth about how God breaks down *all* barriers. The truth about how God authors goodness. And if you believe Psalm 23, sends that goodness to stalk and pursue us all of our lives. Her work was done as truth of how God had been and still is at work in the world, faithfully extending boundaries outwards, ever expansive, always new, rooted in being life-giving.

Tabitha came to see it first-hand in and through Jesus. She watched, especially as the walls of diminishment and loss closed in, how Jesus always responded in a way that opened. Friends, there is no question. Easter is spectacular and revolutionary. But for Tabitha, it was also completely in keeping with how God has acted, how God will act, how God may even be acting this very moment, bringing life from death.

And so, as Jesus came to all in need, she too went to those widows. She lived in trust with every breath, in a kind of life that by definition is expansive, sharing, giving, caring, every day until she died. The expansive force of Tabitha's way of life is on clear display in these few verses.

Those widows that she helped came together. They gathered in that room to honor her. Not coming each separately as individuals in one place, but as a community already bound together. They came as one body to care for *her* body. Luke tells us that they brought those life-giving things that she had made for them. They were clinging to them. I imagine they were clinging, yes, so as never to forget Tabitha. But I also firmly believe that they were doing it to honor her. A tangible sign of faith and expansion, honoring and remembering that knock on their door, that smile and outstretched arm expanding their collapsing worlds back into connection. For

remember, the loss of Tabitha was not the first devastating loss these women knew. They knew that in the midst of it could come a breath of hope and a power of belief.

But it's not just the women gathered there where we see Tabitha's expansive way of being. The other disciples that were there sent a pair of men running to go get Peter, who was in the next town over, and bring Peter here. And Peter, well, he too is an ordinary person living a resurrection life in this story. He was a disciple as well. For remember, to be a disciple is to be a learner. And in these few verses, he learned so much from Jesus, didn't he? The first thing is he came when he was called. There was no reason given to Peter as to why he should come. Just come, you are needed. How many times did Jesus respond to that? He saw in these messengers their distress, and Peter did not look away. When he came there, he saw the mourning and he was moved by compassion, just like Jesus. He created a place of quiet, just like Jesus did. And then he prayed. It is textbook to how Luke would have said how Jesus would have handled moments just like those. And it is textbook for not just Peter, but for you and me, as well.

Peter knew the power of prayer. He knew it from the one who taught him, from Jesus. Not just in how to pray, not just the possibility of hearing our still speaking God, but connecting to the still creating, still breathing, still expanding power of God. And then in the midst of his own prayer, just like it happened with Jesus time after time after time in Luke's gospel, life poured out, lungs filled, and expansion happened.

Peter raised Tabitha from the dead! That is no small matter. But he lived the truth of new life even in the shadow of death, just as Tabitha did, just as all the other disciples of that time did, too. He, like Tabitha, lived his life in a way that honored and recognized the world-changing, amazing miracle of Easter. He saw it in the ongoing context of what God has been doing, is doing, and will always do. It took it from this moment of fancy, this moment of question, to the sure-fired hope that expansion was always on its way.

And Peter lived the way of Christ every single day with every single breath, until he found himself in the very place Christ did. Oh yeah, Peter found himself literally on a cross. But I also know that Peter found himself just like that bandit on the other cross – in paradise, too.

Yes, both Peter and Tabitha did what you and I eventually will do. They died. But wow, how they lived! And not just for themselves, but how their lungs expanded with Spirit, how their bodies and souls expanded with faith, how they became sources of expansion for others whose worlds were closing in on them. For that is what they learned, not just to hope *for* our faith, but to trust *in* our faith. Both through Jesus and through the stories of faith that had long since found their way into their hearts.

Friends, at the heart of Easter living, the reason we leave that "Alleluia" banner up for a while, is that what happened on Easter is amazing and hard to take in. But its heart is simply hope and trust. Not simply in any single or isolated example, even one as spectacular as life pouring forth from a tomb near Calvary, but how that act resonates with the God of life and creation who has always been up to such goodness, if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear. Life. Expansive life.

In this passage, it says that many believed in Joppa. I don't think it's so much because of that stunning act, either. But instead because they had come to recognize that death is really not a barrier between God and us or between us and each other. If we accept that truth, how might all the ills that plague us -- how might all the barriers that divide us -- be healed by a God who so clearly loves us, and who is so clearly still at work among us. Luke's Gospel, his story of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's understanding of God, is just like Tabitha, is just like Peter. It is on the move, caring and sharing. And it is relentlessly expansive in new creation.

And so, the question before us this morning is: Will we become disciples like Tabitha and Peter? Will we commit ourselves, yes, to good works like Tabitha. Yes, to faith and prayer like Peter. But maybe even more importantly, commit ourselves to the reason for it all: the utter conviction that the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Miriam and Moses, the God of Jacob and Joseph, the God of Ruth and Naomi, the God of David and Jonathan, the God of the faithful, past, present and future, of all we are and all we may yet be, is speaking not just truth but action. Not just moral lessons or codes for living, but new creation. Not just interrupting the world once, but turning the whole world right side up again.

My question for you is will we be as relentless as Peter and Tabitha in our ministries of grace and welcome, in our pursuit of justice and kindness, in our reaching out to those for whom the walls of the world are closing in, to offer them expansion. To offer them a place in our family. To offer an equal share in our calling. Will we, like Peter, leave the safe confines of these walls to come wherever help is needed, even if we don't know what it is. I know you and I can, and we are up to it if we not just choose to, but trust to.

One last thing. I love how Peter lingers at the end of this story. With the raising of Tabitha, with joy restored, for some reason Luke tells us that Peter decides to stick around for a bit. I think that it was too much to take in in one day. And I think he wanted to be with this small community in this small town, doing good things. Because where there is expansion, there is hope and reality.

I think Peter would linger here, too. Because here, just like in today's story, there is expansion. It's both a promise and a way of life that we're striving for. And yet, let us never forget that it is one more example of God at work in this broken and breaking world.

So let us linger in the Easter season, in these days of resurrection, that we may too find the expansion God offers. And then let us, like Peter and Tabitha before us, continue our ministry, bringing about the expansive kin-dom of God here in Stockbridge, here in the Berkshires, maybe even in the world that so desperately needs it, with every breath we take. Until we too hear a knock on the door. No, not on our closed or locked home. But a knock on the door of our expanding hearts. That knock where Jesus will call us to come home to peace, to fullness, to expansion beyond anything we can yet know. In the place Jesus promised, the one he has already prepared, the place where joy and spirit have no end. That is the Easter truth.

Friends, let us stand and sing about it!